

the SPECTATOR



Revelation in Mississippi

GREENWOOD, Miss.

SOMETHING is happening in Mississippi today which the press has largely ignored. To most people, the name of the state stands for beatings and bombings, church burnings and fear. These are real enough. But Mississippi today is also the scene of another phenomenon, of an extraordinary humanization.

The white volunteer in the Summer Project, or the visitor like myself, walks down a street in the Negro community of some town which has been "opened up": Greenwood, Hattiesburg, Holly Springs. He is a stranger to the local people but they stop him, greet him, ask how long he is staying, does he know so-and-so who is also in the Movement. Without seeming "grateful," a better-off Negro will insist on paying for his dinner. And the Negro community quickly becomes home; he feels safe there. If a car passes, he watches to see if it contains white men or black, and when the passengers turn out to be black (or fellow white workers), he relaxes. He eats in Negro restaurants; it is a strange sensation to go into a white place. Suddenly everything is inverted, and with the inversion comes a new identity. Not that the white man "becomes a Negro," but that he begins to feel he has found a new self through others, through the very people who are, in some eyes, his enemies.

Inspirational clichés? No, just the experience of an American in one part of the world where human beings seem to be moving forward instead of standing still. Mississippi was a blank on the map before; today, hundreds of young people study the names of its counties and speak of them with emotion. In the Freedom Schools, the words to be learned from a blackboard are directly related to the current struggle: convicted, levying, testimony, adhering. At headquarters in Jackson (known as the COFO office because the project is being carried out in the name of a rather mythical coalition of civil rights organizations; actually SNCC is doing 4/5 of the job) reporters stream through and old friends meet unexpectedly. The Greenwood office, like Jackson's, is manned around the clock; workers eat casually, sleep little—often on desks or sitting up in chairs—and Jim Forman, SNCC's executive secretary, mops the floor at midnight.



Drawing by Ernest Crichlow

REVOLUTIONARY CUBA comes to mind; there is spirited singing and that humor which is directed toward oneself as often as toward the opposition. Even the climate is the same. To make this comparison may be a disservice to the Movement, for SNCC has enough trouble with red-baiting. And of course what is happening in Mississippi has no particular political orientation.

But the project is a threat to the established Southern order, and is meant to be. The redneck meets that threat by concocting a homemade bomb or calling the Greenwood office at 2 a.m. and growling, "Kiss mah ass." Those above him on the social ladder are more rational, like the police commissioner who passed by that same office one afternoon and let himself be embroiled in an unusual discussion with a large number of the project workers. He admitted the reason for his opposition to Negroes voting—power.

It would be naive not to acknowledge some of the project's problems and weaknesses: the fear and resistance among local Negroes who have a little to lose; the limited success of the community centers compared to the Freedom Schools; the confusion and inefficiency. One of the big questions, which cannot now be answered, is: What will happen when the white volunteers leave—as most, but not all, are expected to do? This question arises not only in terms of renewed violence but also on the less dramatic scale of situations such as that faced by Sally Belfrage, daughter of the GUARDIAN editor-in-exile, who has organized donated books into a library at Greenwood and must find a literate local person to maintain it come fall.

PROBLEMS AND ALL, the spirit remains—and other whites feel it too. An orthodox Jewish folk singer commented: "It reminds me of the Hassidic movement in Judaism: it's like fresh air. These people take clichés and give them new meaning; the preachers interpret Biblical legends in ways I never heard before—but ways that make sense." A nurse trained in psychiatry said in Holly Springs: "There are so many beautiful people among Mississippi Negroes; in one sense, they don't seem deprived at all." She had, I think, discovered that the South is not a four-letter word as many outsiders feel, thinking primarily of the white racist. The South is Negroes, mostly; it is a rural and small town people who haven't been made neurotic by technological one-dimensionality.

And she went on to say: "I wonder what will happen to the white volunteers when they go back to their Northern, middle-class worlds. They may be very depressed." For the remarkable truth is, a great many of those who have been to Mississippi this summer are sorrowful when the time comes to leave.

—Elizabeth Sutherland